THE NAMING COMMISSION RECOMMENDS

Fort Johnson

As the new name for Fort Polk, Louisiana

Late into the evening on Tuesday, 14 May 1918, **William Henry Johnson** stood sentry at the foremost redoubt on the flank of a forward trench in the Argonne Forest. Johnson's presence at that position alone was improbable: most American soldiers were yet to arrive in Europe as the nation struggled through the logistics of training, equipping, and deploying an army of four million volunteers and draftees. When they did arrive, fewer still of those soldiers would be African-American, as the racial politics of the age led American commander John J. Pershing to include only white combat troops in his expeditionary force. By enlisting in a segregated army, shipping out months earlier than many U.S. soldiers, and being attached to an allied force, Johnson and his fellow sentry were – against all odds – Black Americans wearing French uniforms at the tip of democracy's spear in the final spring of World War I. And in the middle of that May night, Johnson would show he belonged there.

Johnson's action began around two o'clock in the morning, when a German raiding party suddenly attacked his position. Sent to cause chaos and capture or kill as many of the sleeping soldiers as possible, the German attack was unexpected and ferocious: the two Americans had barely heard the sounds of snipping wires when enemy grenades fell into their trench, incapacitating Johnson's comrade and wounding Johnson himself. Facing a fierce enemy, wounded, and without support, Johnson could have surrendered but chose to fight.

Sounding the alarm before singlehandedly facing the enemy, Johnson threw grenades until his supply was exhausted. When he ran out of grenades, Johnson fired his rifle until he spent his ammunition. When he ran out of bullets, Johnson charged the enemy, swinging his rifle as a club. And when he observed two Germans about to carry his wounded comrade away for interrogation, Johnson abandoned his rifle and instead drew his bolo knife, fighting off the raiders at close quarters and pushing them back from the position. Ultimately, Johnson single-handedly engaged approximately two dozen men that night, killing at least four; few returned to their lines unscathed. Despite being outnumbered by a factor of twenty and sustaining 21 separate wounds in hand-to-hand combat, he had saved his comrade, sounded the alarm, and secured his unit's safety and position.

Johnson became the United States' first hero of the Great War, immediately receiving the French Croix de Guerre for his actions. He was the first American soldier ever to receive the award. Johnson was an icon on the home front, and his story motivated many African-Americans to support the war effort. Serving with his unit through many subsequent battles, he became known as

"Black Death" and was paraded through New York City when he returned.

Yet though the hero of his hour, Johnson was also the victim of his times. Upon returning to Jim Crow America, he was not awarded equal benefits as white soldiers. Unable to effectively work as a result of his wounds and lacking appropriate treatment for them, he died destitute in 1929. Though buried with military honors in Arlington National Cemetery, he faded from major memory for most of a century. Indeed, even his resting place was unknown for most of that time.

In recent decades, however, those aware of Johnson's story began to reassert its rightful place in our national memory. He was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart in 1996 and the Distinguished Service Cross in 2002; the latter was upgraded to the Medal of Honor in 2015.

Sgt. William Henry Johnson's heroism should continue to serve as an example and inspiration for the soldiers of our present and our future, just as it did for soldiers of his past. His story embodies an indomitable will to win against all odds, the sacrifices borne by our soldiers, and the many heritages of our military heroes.